Could you go info-vegan?
A diet for informatio overload

By Jena McGregor July 22, 2011

(EMMANUEL DUNAND/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

There's an overwhelming amount of information in today's "knowledge economy." And this was all *after* I decided what I was going to write about. That idea came from my RSS reader—yet another source for news—which pointed me to a blog post over at Leadership Now about the overwhelming amount of information most workers experience in today's "knowledge economy." The post offers a snapshot of a new book on the topic called Overload! by author Jonathan Spira, who runs a research firm that studies worker productivity in our constant-interruption world.

We're all well aware of how much phone calls and text messages can interrupt our workflow, what a time suck Twitter can become, and how inexplicably irritating the "reply-all" button

can be. But the numbers Spira trots out are still pretty jaw-dropping. He estimates that reading and processing just 100 e-mail messages can occupy over half of a worker's day. For every 100 people who are unnecessarily copied on an e-mail, eight hours of productivity are lost. And he notes that one Fortune 500 company believes that an incapacitating amount of information costs the firm $1 billion in lost productivity per year. Wrestling with this issue is fast becoming a serious issue for many companies and workplaces. The Economist recently noted that management consultants are spotting an opportunity for new clients—McKinsey has come up with three principles for business leaders to push to keep workers productive and not overly distracted.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers has urged employees not to send email over the weekends, so as to not create false urgency when it's not needed. French IT services company Atos Origin has a plan to go e-mail free in the next three years to cut down on what it calls the "information pollution" that e-mail brings.

If that weren't enough to prove the movement fighting the data deluge is gaining steam, there's now a nonprofit devoted to tackling the problem: The Information Overload Research Group launched in February to "conquer information overload" and "restore sanity" to working professionals. A new buzz word has been coined: Blue State Digital founder Clay Johnson has a site called "Infovegan"—"a blog about information obesity, information diets, and civic accountability."

And for those who aren't so worried about e-mail distractions but think PowerPoint is the world's worst productivity killer, there's this recent news from Switzerland. There is now an organization in that country devoted to ending the use of that ubiquitous and maddeningly dull software. The man behind the effort (who, naturally, is also trying to promote his book, The PowerPoint Fallacy) claims that PowerPoint costs Switzerland 2.1 billion Swiss Francs each year, and if it gets 100,000 signatures, will be able to hold a national referendum banning the program.

Something tells me such an effort would do well in the U.S., too, especially in the military. But since a national ban on PowerPoint is, well, unlikely—and your company dropping e-mail just as much so—there are a few things leaders can do in the meantime to help fight the war on info overload. Stop sending e-mails that say nothing more than "thanks!" Avoid the "reply-all" button whenever possible. Try using flip charts instead of PowerPoint. Reserve "thinking time" in your schedule, and encourage employees to log off at least every once in a while, no matter how foreign that idea may be in your office.

And of course, turn off the alerts for new e-mails and Twitter updates. Given that I've heard a beep for each of the 34 tweets that have come through since I started writing, that's some advice I should heed myself.